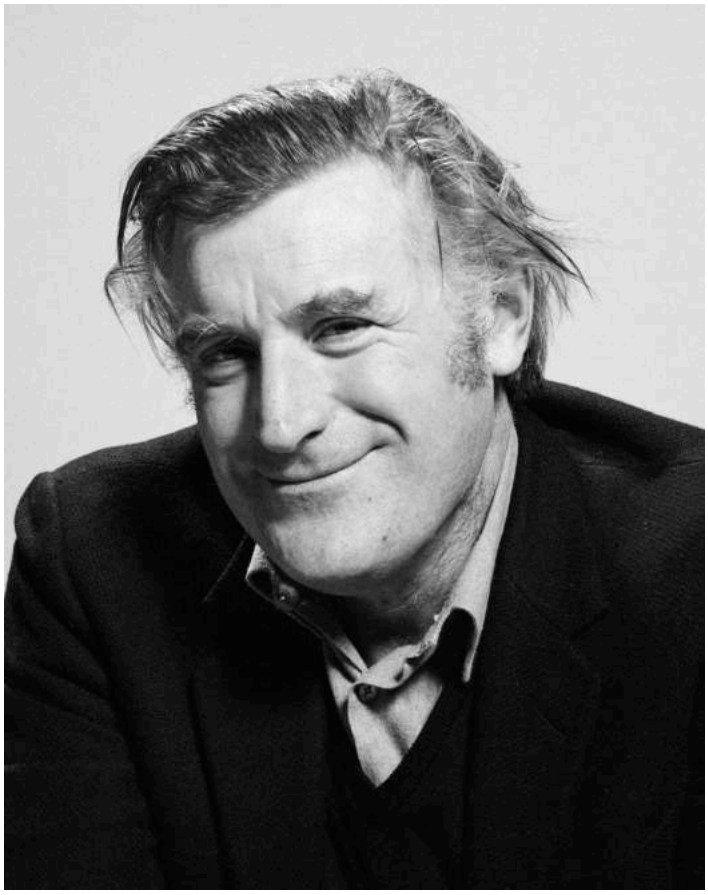
The Ted Hughes Society Journal



Volume V Issue 2

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Editorial

The months since the publication of Volume V Number 1 have seen some notable developments for the future of Hughes criticism and the shape of the Hughes community. First came the very welcome news, in March, of the Ted Hughes Network, an initiative sponsored by the University of Huddersfield and directed by Steve Ely, well known to readers of this journal. The Network aims to promote the development of teaching and research related to Hughes's work through a series of annual lectures, synmposia and Visiting Fellowships, to develop archival materials and but also to raise the profile of Hughes's writing among a wider public and to create new opportunities for academic and non-academic audiences to engage with his work and perpetuate and extend his legacy. A major three-day symposium is scheduled for September 2017 on the theme of 'Ted Hughes and Place'.

Then, in April and early May, came another cluster of events proving the diversity of the community of poets and readers indebted to one particular aspect of his work. 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, that 'airport for incoming translations', as Hughes and his co-editor Daniel Weissbort put it in their own first editorial, for poetry from Eastern Europe and from Israel that was, they put simply, 'more universal than ours'. Three current and former successors of Hughes and Weissbort, Sasha Dugdale, David Constantine and Helen Constantine, have edited *Centres of Cataclysm* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2016) a substantial and moving anthology of poems published by the magazine in its first half century, in which generous extracts from Hughes's editorials from the 1960s provide a bracing spine. The discomfort of literal translations, 'the very oddness and struggling dumbness of a word for word translation is what makes our imagination jump', does not just express something of the power of much of Hughes's own poetics. It fits the spare, rough-about-the edges and physically frail feel of the first issues, printed on tissue-thin paper as a deliberate attempt both to cut costs and to avoid more expensive errors: both 'that American translatorese that's too glib in their way', and 'the menace with English translators', which in a letter to Weissbort of 1964 Hughes identified as 'lack of momentum & flair – they're all stilted + minced up, Senior Parlour consciences'. (*LTH* 231)

Times may just have changed; consciences may just have been pricked. That specific jab at the common room of his Cambridge alma mater, Pembroke, where Daniel Weissbort spent an hour during his own visit to the College, in frail health, in 2010, made it all the more pleasing to be able to welcome the *Modern Poetry in Translation* team and a very broad range of guests, from sixth form students to scholars and poets from across England and Europe, for the first of two study days of workshops and readings organized by the magazine; the second followed a fortnight later, hosted by the Queen's College, Oxford. The two Colleges, each with close connections to the Hughes family, also combined to fund the digitization of the first issue, now presented in brilliant and robust clarity, and the development of an admirable microsite devoted to its poems and contributors. It is full of fascinating profiles, contexts, and responses by contemporary poets to the

first issue, and also provides an opportunity for distraction-free reading of the poetry. The microsite is accessible via the magazine's website.

Re-reading my own first editorial I realise that I billed the current issue both too modestly and inaccurately. I promised that it would be devoted to the second half of the fruits of the Sheffield conference to appear in the *Journal*. But that is not to imply that there is anything secondary about its contents. There are indeed excellent and path-breaking versions of papers presented in Sheffield by new voices in Hughes scholarship. Katherine Robinson writes on Hughes's response to tales and texts of the *Mabinogion*, Jack Thacker on the poet's commitment to animal welfare as a farmer. Ann Henning Jocelyn adds a suggestive and personally inflected overview of Hughes's serious interest in astrology, and Mick Gowar provides a deftly curated commentary of some extraordinary illustrations his students have been inspired to create by encounters with Hughes's poetry. Each of these essays has I hope benefited from some, sometimes significant revision en route from panel and Powerpoint to page.

They are joined by two other substantial contributions and one significant discovery. The poet and critic Gregory Leadbetter's essay on the symbiotic relationship between Hughes's own critical and poetic vision and his own practice of reading began life with a paper at the first Ted Hughes Society gathering in 2012, and before that in a remarkable exchange with Hughes himself in the summer of 1998; Ed Reiss's wide-ranging essay, originally intended as a Sheffield paper, on Hughes's attitude to the social, cultural and linguistic manifestations of Englishness has itself taken advantage of a somewhat longer gestation. And Tony Othen's revelatory photographs of Hughes from December 1982, which bookend this issue, represent an important addition to the archive of material that will continue to be made available to the public, with luck in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, in the months and years ahead.

All are, I think, fine examples of the ever-growing reach and ambition of our engagement, as readers, scholars and interpreters, with Hughes's work, scholarship, adding appropriate detail as well as new perspectives to our knowledge of the poet. And in quiet ways they illustrate how the established and growing network of Hughesians are adjusting to the new conditions established by Jonathan Bate's use of the archive in his recent biography, now published in revised and corrected paperback and ebook editions. It is too early to do more than to note the fourth and saddest change in the air in which Hughes's work will henceforth be read, the death of Gerald Hughes at the age of 95. We can only be grateful for his memoir, *Ted and I*.

In the next issue, expect an ecocritical reading of 'The Gulkana' by Hugh Dunkerley and a reflection on Hughes and the future of biography written by the late Fred Rue Jacobs. I look forward to seeing what else will join them. Please feel free to send in notes of interest and discoveries, and to contact me with ideas for contributions.

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Pembroke College Cambridge

List of Abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

CB	*Cave Birds* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978)
C	*Crow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)
CP	*Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)
E	*Elmet* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
G	*Gaudete* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977)
LTH	*Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber & Faber, 2007)
IM	*The Iron Man* (London: Faber & Faber, illustrated by Andrew Davison, 1985 [1968])
IW	*The Iron Woman* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993)
MW	*Moon-Whales and Other Moon Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976)
PC	Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, *Poet and Critic* (London: The British Library, 2012)
PM	*Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989 (1967))
RE	*Remains of Elmet* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979)
SGCB	*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
UNS	*Under the North Star* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981)
WP	*Winter Pollen* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
WT	*What is the Truth?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

The Snake, the Goddess and the Poet's Learning: Ted Hughes and the Contentions of Criticism

Gregory Leadbetter

It is a familiar paradox of Ted Hughes's career that his principal works of literary criticism – *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* and the 'The Snake in the Oak: The Mythos of Coleridge's "new principle" of Metre' – were published at the peak of his longstanding discomfort with prose criticism. He had given that discomfort its own myth, which became foundational to the narrative of his life and ethos as a poet: the dream of the burnt fox, from his time as an undergraduate at Pembroke College, Cambridge, which led him to forego university 'Eng. Lit.'. It may be no coincidence that the account of that dream as it appears in *Winter Pollen* (*WP* 8-9) is dated 1993, with the Shakespeare furore – and the anxious drafting of the essay on Coleridge – still fresh.[1] There was the burnt fox once more, as if still saying, forty years on: 'Stop this – you are destroying us' (*WP* 9). Indeed, this thought gnawed its way into an insistent new form in the last years of Hughes's life: as he told Keith Sagar in July 1998, 'That fox was telling – prose is destroying you physically, literally: maybe not others, but you, yes' (*PC* 270). On the face of it, then – from his early twenties onwards, and with increasing intensity – Hughes identified himself as a poet in opposition to the act of criticism.

My argument here is that this narrative – whatever its enabling or disabling effects might have been for him – elides the more complex truth of Hughes's practice as a poet. Here I confess a personal interest. I am both a poet and a critic by calling – and in my university teaching and research interests, literary criticism and creative writing are continuous with each other. From an early stage, I realised that I would have to resolve for myself the tension, so evident in Hughes, between poetry and prose criticism. Moreover, in writing on Coleridge, I was acutely aware of another narrative closely akin to Hughes's own fears about the effects of writing prose – one popularised, in part, by Coleridge's nagging self-accusations: that he had ruined himself as a poet by being drawn into metaphysics and philosophical criticism. As with Hughes, that notion elides the more interesting truth. For anyone reading Coleridge and Hughes as both a poet and critic, the question of how poetry and criticism interact assumes a personal urgency.

In this essay, I explore the dynamics of that question through Hughes's practice and experience as a critic of Coleridge and Shakespeare in particular, which dramatically concentrates the issues and values in play. I consider Hughes's critical methods and the problems raised by their reception, and go on to propose that the act of criticism was in fact fundamental to Hughes's practice as a writer, and the particular cultural agency he envisaged for the poet. Finally – both as a reading of Hughes and

[1] On Hughes's anxiety around the writing of 'The Snake in the Oak', see *PC* 223-34. This essay is revised and expanded from the paper entitled '"The Snake in the Oak": Ted Hughes, Coleridge, and the Contentions of Reading', which I gave at the Ted Hughes Society Conference at Pembroke College, Cambridge in September 2012.

as a working response to the question at the heart of this essay – I sketch the qualities of an imaginatively productive continuum in which poetry and criticism might embody an undivided impulse, with a common source and a kindred cultural purpose, in which *finding* and *making* meet and fuse.

Hughes's essay on Coleridge is continuous with his work on Shakespeare. In February 1993, less than a year after the publication of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he wrote to Keith Sagar: 'I've blundered into the pit of sorting out what exactly is going on in Coleridge's 3 poems – Kubla, Mariner, Christabel' (*PC* 223). In 'The Snake in the Oak', Hughes reconstructs those three mystery poems as the 'sacred epic' of Coleridge's '*inspired incantatory language*. The "nativity" (in the sacred drama of his own life and fate) of his poetic "Word"' (*WP* 403). Hughes presents the action of those poems as the shamanic drama of a mythic pattern – in fact, several overlapping mythic patterns – which 'together make a single myth, which is also, as a poet's myths always are, (among other things) a projected symbolic self-portrait of the poet's own deepest psychological make-up' (*WP* 375). The central event of the myth is presented as a conflict between what Hughes calls Coleridge's 'Christian Self' and on the other hand – following the terms of one of Coleridge's most suggestive self-meditations – his 'Unleavened Self' (*WP* 377). For Hughes, the mystery poems sing of the call and triumph of the 'Pagan Great Goddess', the victory of Coleridge's 'Unleavened Self' over his 'Christian Self' – at one and the same time 'the myth of what made him a poet' (*WP* 433) and 'the myth, likewise, of what destroyed him' (*WP* 375). It destroyed him, because in Coleridge's despairing turn from that mythopoesis in 1800, Hughes sees a rejection of that call and the 'healing wholeness' (*WP* 453) it offered. As in his reading of Shakespeare, Hughes sees in Coleridge's mythos 'a large-scale, brilliantly concise, diagnostic, luminous vision of England's spiritual/intellectual predicament' (*WP* 439): that is, the rejection, within English spiritual/intellectual life, of a greater, more holistic inheritance, a more capacious consciousness.

'The Snake in the Oak' is an extraordinary essay. Readers do not have to agree with the entirety of Hughes's argument to find in its exhilarating prose an authenticity of response and a catalyst to further engagement. Hughes's principal gift to readers of Coleridge is to take his visionary life so seriously – and the distinctive terms in which he conveys his own sense of what is at stake in those poems. As his title suggests, Hughes is particularly alert to the mythic and religious import of the snake, and the awkward fact that this figure, so prominent in Coleridge's thinking and imagining, 'in all orthodox Christian contexts is the very incarnation of Evil' (*WP* 458).[2] In re-casting the role of the snake and the Goddess in the history of English poetry, Hughes's essay contains within itself a heterodox vision of European art and spirituality – and situates Coleridge within that vision. Hughes's knowledge and insight combine with his power as a storyteller, in what Kathleen Raine called 'the learning of the Imagination'.[3]

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[2] See also Hughes's *Crow* poem 'A Horrible Religious Error', and its precursor in D.H. Lawrence, 'Snake'.

[3] 'Ted Hughes and Coleridge', in Nick Gammage (ed.), *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 135.

I have written elsewhere of my admiration of these virtues, and those points in Hughes's argument with which I take issue – in particular, his reiteration of the old idea that Coleridge gave up on poetry after 1802, his understanding (in the 'Christian Self') of Coleridge's relationship to Christianity, and the tying of Coleridge's mystery poems so closely to the 'Pagan Great Goddess' as to risk reifying the metaphorical life of that story and narrowing the import of the poems.[4] There are a couple of minor factual errors in the essay, too.[5] But Hughes never claims that 'The Snake in the Oak' is the final word on Coleridge: far from it. He knew that the essay said at least as much about him as it did about his subject:

> Poems of this kind can obviously never be explained. They are total symbols of psychic life. But they can be interpreted – a total symbol is above all a vessel for interpretations: the reader fills it and drinks. According to that, what I have to say here may be of use only to me. The only value of these remarks to some other reader may be – to prompt them to fill the vessel up for themselves, from their own sources. Like the variety of potential readers, the variety of potential interpretation is infinite. (*WP* 393-4)

In his reading of Coleridge, Hughes discloses his own 'sources', and his own way of thinking about poetry – at the heart of which lies a faith in its revelatory power: the authority of poetic truth.

Despite its interest, Hughes's contribution has yet to penetrate beyond a handful of Coleridge scholars, and only a very few allow it any significance.[6] J.C.C. Mays concludes that 'what Hughes has to say about Coleridge's prosody is altogether misleading' – though Mays's suggestion that Hughes revived the idea of Coleridge's 'wholesale commitment to stress-metrics, based on "Christabel"' needs to be qualified.[7] Mays, in a pathfinding study, argues that in 'Christabel' Coleridge was to blend in new ways Classical, quantitative metre with English vernacular stress-patterns.[8] That modulates – and does not, in fact, wholly oppose – Hughes's own argument in 'The Snake in the Oak' and its companion essay, 'Myths, Metres, Rhythms', that

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[4] See Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 4 *et passim*.

[5] See Paul Cheshire, 'Review: Ted Hughes, "The Snake in the Oak", in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*', *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 7, (Spring 1996), pp. 55-8, 56: 'What matter if it was Bartram, not Purchas, who had written about alligators rutting in the Carolinas; if Wordsworth was not the eldest of five brothers?'

[6] For one of these exceptions, see John Beer, 'Coleridge's afterlife', in Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 241-42, and *Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 139-73.

[7] J.C.C. Mays, *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 211 n. 56, p. 200.

[8] Ibid., pp. 191 *et passim*.

account, Bate's biography of Hughes is ready to dismiss formative elements of Hughes's thought – such as his interest in occultism – as 'bonkers'.[15] During my doctoral research on Coleridge, a scholar of contemporary poetry – upon learning that I took pleasure in 'The Snake in the Oak' – quietly but emphatically advised me to leave Hughes out of my thesis entirely. Although I would not and did not do that, I had been exposed to a mild but unsettling trace of the withering ray once turned upon *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

It seems, then, that despite the intervening years, many scholars – even those who might be expected to give Hughes more credit – are not ready to engage with his contributions to criticism. How to account for this antipathy?

When he did take on the mantle of critic, Hughes consciously eschewed two conventions of scholarly activity typically regarded as essential to achieving intellectual rigour, as it's fondly termed. He sums up the first this way: 'I haven't cocked my leg at every reference, as Goethe says, and piddled a little scholarly note, to reassure the next dog along' (*LTH* 628). Of course, it isn't that Hughes wilfully disregards the work of others in the field – but he prefers not to play any citation game that might risk cluttering his argument. What's more, Hughes unashamedly declares the 'subjective' basis of his readings – that is, an interpretative dynamic driven by personal vision, or even need: not every academic would concede, as he does in his centenary essay on T.S. Eliot, 'The Poetic Self', that 'even the most rigorous scholarship hardly hopes to get beyond its own space-flights of subjective phantasmagoria' (*WP* 291).

These deviations from academic norms combine with further, more fundamental characteristics of Hughes's critical method, which bring his criticism closer to the conventions of storytelling than of analytical commentary (though these occupy a common spectrum). Throughout his criticism, the impulse towards narrative, and indeed metanarrative, is clear. Each of his essays on Shakespeare, Eliot and Coleridge takes the form of a story: the description of a mythos at work in the fabric of their writing. Robert Graves was Hughes's literary exemplar in this respect: the detective-like manner of his approach, building cumulatively towards an as-if revelatory vision, is ample evidence that Hughes 'soaked up' *The White Goddess* as an undergraduate (*LTH* 679-81). But for Hughes, there was another, intensely personal drive within that narrative impulse: his attempt to make sense of Sylvia Plath's poetic gift and what he came to regard as intimately related to that gift – her death. This drive emerges publicly in his comments on *Ariel* for the *Poetry Book Society* in 1965, where he alludes to the presence, in Plath's poetry, of 'a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her "hood of bone", floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminous vision of a Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death' (*WP* 161). This is the crystallised vision within Hughes's reading of what he called her 'supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus',[16] building successively

[15] Bate, *Ted Hughes*, p. 373.

[16] 'Introduction' to Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 16.

Coleridge's poem employs 'a field of flexing, contrapuntal tensions, between two simultaneous but opposed laws – that is to say, between a law of "natural quantities" set in opposition to the law of a fixed, basic metric pattern' (*WP* 336). While Mays quite rightly puts to flight the notion that Coleridge stopped being a poet around 1802, both he and Hughes argue that Coleridge sought restlessly for a poetry adequate to the urgency of his inner life. For Mays, the poematic fabric of 'Christabel' involves 'something magical: working sound to make things happen, to manipulate and control hidden forces';[9] for Hughes, not so dissimilarly, Coleridge was compelled 'to search out, within himself, a *new* rhythm – as if the release of what he had to give depended absolutely on his finding that inner "fountain" of his own music' (*WP* 374). While there are important differences between Mays and Hughes in detail and emphasis, there are equally important affinities, too.

There is an obvious parallel between the wary reception of Hughes' work on Coleridge and the reception of his work on Shakespeare. Jonathan Bate grants that *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is '*sui generis*' and in some ways 'prophetic', but concludes that 'the spectacle of Hughes reading Shakespeare is less interesting and important than that of Shakespeare reading Hughes'.[10] Curiously, given Bate's professional interest in his life and work, there is no mention of Hughes in Bate's study of Shakespeare as a *locus* of creativity, *The Genius of Shakespeare* – despite Hughes's book being precisely the kind of 'both/and' criticism Bate rightly admires in Empson.[11] In Hughes's reading, for example, the tragic hero sees in his beloved both what he most loves and most fears (unconditional affirmation and utter betrayal in one and the same person); the 'mythic' and the 'realist' plane operate at one and the same time (even if, in order to get his point across, Hughes invites his readers 'to see both together and then, while still seeing both together, to suspend the one'[12]); and the fabric of Shakespeare's 'double language' is illuminated in ways that even Eric Griffiths – otherwise exasperated by Hughes's book – praised as 'wonderful'.[13] Notoriously, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was also savaged by other academic reviewers, and John Carey, despite raising some legitimate talking-points, allowed himself to level at Hughes intemperate accusations of 'grotesque, donkey-eared vandalism' and 'mumbo-jumbo'.[14] Over twenty years later, while presented as a more or less sympathetic

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[9] *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics*, p. 104.

[10] 'Hughes on Shakespeare', in Terry Gifford ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 147-8. Bate's essay forms the basis of Chapter 28 ('Goddess Revisited') in his *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015).

[11] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. (London: Picador, 2008), pp. 302ff.

[12] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), p. 38. Further references to this American edition, published with revisions three months after the Faber and Faber edition, will be to *Shakespeare and the Goddess.*

[13] *The Times* (9 April 1992). See *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* pp. 129-57 for the passage in question.

[14] 'Shaman Scandal', *The Sunday Times* (5 April 1992).

through introductions of her work, his 1988 piece on 'The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', and of course, *Birthday Letters* and its hinterlands. It reveals his need to understand as the need to tell a story: the fundamental need to know and to be known through the narrative and creative act.[17]

Hughes often defines his methods in opposition to a putative academic orthodoxy. Of his essay on Eliot, he wrote:

> I have suspended scholarly disbelief, and adopted the attitude of an interpretative, performing musician. As he reads the score, the musician imagines he finds the living spirit of the music, the inmost vital being of a stranger, reproduced spontaneously, inside himself (WP 291).

Of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he says in correspondence that 'the book grew as an imaginative work, or like an imaginative work': 'it's a sort of prose poem, if nothing else' (*LTH* 595, 591). In the American edition of the book itself, Hughes attempts to conjure his audience accordingly: 'The ideal reader would regard my idea as a sort of musical adaptation, a song'.[18] His terms here find an echo in Harold Bloom's critical contention that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem – a poem not itself*'.[19] At once an authentic statement of method and a plea, Hughes attempts to disarm the ungenerous response he clearly anticipates – always hoping, as he wrote elsewhere, to find readers 'with the cooperative, imaginative attitude of a co-author'; 'creative as well as sympathetic imagination, not just critical attention'.[20] This wish, of course, is the reflex of his own instincts as a reader. Neil Corcoran has observed how, in commenting on his own poems, Hughes goes about 'setting an illuminating lamp of prose' beside each work, 'inserting a second co-creative self between poem and reader in a uniquely sympathetic form of close reading'.[21] Corcoran's image just as well describes Hughes's critical method more generally.

From the outset, Hughes was aware that these methods were likely to meet with resistance when he turned to the national poet, and was willing to present his reading of Shakespeare as 'an imaginative idea rather than a

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[17] What I describe here should be distinguished from 'fictocriticism', a term coined in Australia, and most often employed to describe more literary ways of approaching problems of ethnography (see Hazel Smith, 'Creative-Critical Hybrids', in Steve Earnshaw (ed.), *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 331- 40, 333): Hughes is not as self-conscious in his methods nor as theoretically aligned with poststructuralism as fictocriticism tends to be.

[18] *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 44.

[19] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn. (1973; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 70.

[20] *PC* 9 (cited from an unpublished introductory paragraph for 'Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism' in *Winter Pollen*); *PC* 27 (on *Crow*: October 1973).

[21] Neil Corcoran, 'Hughes as prose writer', *Cambridge Companion*, p. 123.

scholarly idea'.[22] That said, by the time *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was published, he was also ready to resist academic distaste in decisive terms – with a diagnosis drawn from the paradigms he describes in the book. While publicly defending 'the musical dominance of the mythic substructure' in Shakespeare, in a reply to Carey,[23] he was more frank in his private correspondence. To Keith Sagar, he wrote that 'The Academics identified themselves to a man, (with a kind of naivety) with the Adonis character in his Angelo phase', i.e. the puritanical aggressor and denouncer of Goddess-tinged depravity (*PC* 220). To Derwent May he went further:

> they don't know a thing outside their handful of disciplinary texts and nothing has ever happened to them. Those who know more and have learned otherwise keep their mouths shut and creep about, like estate workers among the gentry. The whole outfit stinks of pusillanimity and intellectual disgrace. (*LTH* 604)

For Hughes, the academics' rejection of his work was a symptom of the vast historical conflict played out in the Shakespearean microcosm he described: as he told Ben Sonnenberg, 'I could not expect our humanist post-Anglican secular orthodoxy suddenly to agree that their four hundred year censorship and prohibition of what I am trying to unearth was, as I most emphatically argue that it was, a calamitous mistake' (*LTH* 611).

Hughes's sensitivity to the reception of his ideas signals the crux of his position, both as a poet and critic. 'What English scholars cannot concede', he writes, ('except the real ones') 'is that myth is a collection of facts – . . . psychologically hard data. . . . Lit. Scholars deny me, simply, a different kind of scholarship' (*LTH* 609-10). 'Maybe', he suggests of his work on Shakespeare, 'the novelty of my approach is nothing else but to see that level of the content – for the first time – as important' (*PC* 231). He asks readers of the American edition of *Shakespeare and the Goddess* to accept, if only provisionally, Shakespeare as a 'mythic poet' – 'temporarily lifting away everything that might have been written by a kind of Dickens' in order to do so.[24] It is, for Hughes, an act of cultural recovery – in both senses of the word. As he told Simon Jenkins:

> Any discussion of the book is not about Shakespeare or me – it's about importance of spiritual tradition versus unimportance of it, importance of imaginative life against censorship of same, sterility of artistic life versus abundance of artistic life, the survival of group culture versus the suicide of group culture, depth and reality of psychological life versus Academic orthodoxy etc etc etc. The issues seem to me important, general. (*LTH* 607-8)

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[22] Quoted in Bate, 'Hughes on Shakespeare', p. 138 (from an unpublished letter in the Faber and Faber archive).
[23] 'Battling over the Bard', *The Sunday Times* (19 April 1992), reprinted in *PC* 308-10; 308.
[24] *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, pp. 38-9.

There, in a nutshell, are the contentions at the heart of Ted Hughes's criticism – which might equally stand as the contentions at the heart of his poetry. The point I wish to emphasise here is that the animating principle that gives Hughes's criticism its distinction and authority springs from one and the same source as his poetry.

To accept this point is to allow poetry and criticism to blend their currents – as they *did*, for Hughes, in practice – but as his later autobiographical narrative precluded, by identifying prose criticism as an existential danger to his life as a poet. Hughes became trapped in his own story, with its terrible threat of fatality. Hughes's sense that writing critical prose might 'destroy' him closely parallels his belief that Coleridge was 'destroyed' by the refusal and displacement of his poetic calling. The irony is that Hughes refused to accept his calling as a *critic* – which, I am arguing, was in fact wholly involved in his calling as a poet. It may even be that *that* refusal actually caused the psychological and physiological damage that he feared – producing a tragic pattern: in denying the critic for the sake of the poet, Hughes was denying a vital constituent of the poet.

Seamus Perry observes that Hughes is 'a poet broader than his defining myth',[25] and the truth of this applies as much to Hughes's relationship with prose criticism as it does to his poetry. Neil Corcoran's illuminating commentary suggests that prose was 'a kind of *pharmakon*' for Hughes, 'both poison and cure':[26] at once implicating him in what he called 'the inevitable crime of Civilization, or even the inevitable crime of consciousness',[27] yet nonetheless serving a 'quasi-shamanic function' that might draw its poison, even at 'the risk of being, himself, poisoned'.[28] For Hughes, however, the double nature of the *pharmakon* lay not just in prose, but in *language* – and therefore in poetry no less than prose: language, he told Kenneth Baker in 1988, is 'an artificial, human invention' that 'has to be learned', and as such it is the troublous medium of civilization and consciousness itself (*LTH* 547). Language can be liberating, transformative, magical – or disabling, obstructive, evasive. The coinherence of this potential and this risk within language is what makes it so important to Hughes – a matter charged with political, psychological and spiritual significance. Once again, the existential distinction he imposed between poetry and critical prose breaks down. As Corcoran notes, for Hughes the 'human risk of poetry' is 'almost appallingly high', and as a critic he teases out the significance of that risk by adopting the role of 'both the intuitive diviner and the practised investigator of the occult secret of the individual oeuvre'.[29] In his reading of Sylvia Plath's life and work – which set the pattern for his subsequent criticism – he saw 'in the most literal sense a life-and-death emergency trying to communicate itself'.[30] The task of the critic, in Hughes's treatment of Plath, Shakespeare, Eliot, Coleridge and others, was to act in sympathy with the poems in order to

[25] 'Hughes's Urbanity': keynote lecture delivered at the Ted Hughes Society Conference 2015, Sheffield University.
[26] 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 127.
[27] *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 43.
[28] 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 129.
[29] 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 130.
[30] *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 42.

achieve that communication. In this sense, Hughes's practice is akin to what Pater identified as 'imaginative criticism': an act of 'creation' that 'penetrates, through the given literary or artistic product, into the mental and inner constitution of the producer'.[31] If this sounds a little like telepathy, then the implicit qualification must be that as a 'creative' act, such criticism constitutes an imaginative work in its own right, which aspires to a value distinct from mere speculation upon the nature of the author in question. The critic both receives and transmits, on their own terms, the intellectual, imaginative and emotional energy ultimately embodied in the forms of their response. Authentic prose criticism will conduct the constitutional signature of the author no less than his poetry.

Without being written for publication during his lifetime, Hughes's letters bear out the same point. They convey the distinctive critical life of a mind in dialogue with itself and the materials to which its manifold appetites were drawn. As with Coleridge and Keats, the letters witness and describe a process of self-education that achieves fruition in the act of communication. The critical prose of the letters is at the service of the poet, impelled by a common purpose, ramifying through the struggles of self-illumination. At the same time, the letters are both unique to Hughes and – as examples of this order of criticism – transcend the individual, in being devoted to ideas that speak to the common good of human society, and of course the idea of poetry itself.

The burnt fox may have been telling Hughes that *one kind* of prose criticism was destroying him – the kind, perhaps, that swerved 'the depth and reality of psychological life', as he saw it, or otherwise failed to accommodate 'imaginative life' (still common enough) – but not *all* prose criticism. While, on my reading, poetry and prose criticism flourished in symbiosis in Hughes's practice, he was still trying to work out the problem in his own terms (the terms of the burnt fox) to the end of his life. Hughes delighted in Tom Paulin's *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*, and told him so: he relished its reading of 'the wars of the proses', the 'psycho-genetics' of English prose, and how 'prose rhythms' relate to 'the electrograph of the writer's whole sensibility' (*LTH* 727). This was in early August 1998: Hughes's response shows how urgent his need was to find the wavelength on which his concerns in poetry and prose might meet and amplify each other. Around two weeks later, considering '(Eng. Lit.) Academic life', he wrote to Marina Warner, still in pursuit of an answer:

> Something about the nucleus of our sense of the tragic: – in the world of rational, suppressive moral order, the pre-verbal body of individuality, subjectivity, must die. At least must suffer a form of death. It struck me that might explain the Fox dream I tell in my book Winter Pollen. . . . Marina, do you experience anything like this? I think of it in your case, because you write such powerfully intellectual surveys and critical pieces – then come

[31] Cited in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 235 (which in turn cites this comment by Pater in A.C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (New York, 1906), pp. 48-9).

> out with this story ['Lullaby for an Insomniac Princess'] in such a beautiful flow of feeling and music – so natural and flawless, like the opening of an orchid. Not a jagged crackle of intellectual interference anywhere in it. (*LTH* 730)

Warner seemed to Hughes to embody a possibility beyond his own experience, and his own narrative. Despite still being driven to regard critical prose, academia, and the tragic fate of the inner life in terms of the burnt fox, Hughes's letters to Paulin and Warner reveal his implicit recognition that it need not be that way – that prose criticism and poetry (with all that it involves) need not *necessarily* cancel each other out. The tragedy that he discerns may have been that of his own identity as a critic, cast – by his own conception – in the role of suppressor and murderer of the inner life.

It need not have been that way. Hughes's critical prose, at its best, takes up the flame at the heart of his poetry. Its atmosphere of urgent pursuit precipitates a distinctive vision. For all the agony he associated with *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* at one time or another, Hughes told me – in a letter written the day after he wrote to Warner – that it 'wrote itself, if ever anything did'.[32] In that letter, Hughes found a figure that communicated his sense of the task he had set himself, as a critic, and what he invited the reader, in turn, to do – one related to his first attempt to explain his methods. Hughes conceived of his own criticism as an attempt to bring into focus the mythic plane he saw at work in his exemplary texts – to achieve, as he put it, 'the radical yet simple shift that Wittgenstein illustrated with the rough drawing of a bird's head with open beak which can also be seen as a baby rabbit's head with its ears back' (*SGCB* 38). The figure for this perceptual problem that occupied his mind in the last few months of his life is revealed by its triangulation with at least three correspondents. When Hughes wrote to me – in reply to a letter of mine relating chiefly to his essay on Coleridge – he enclosed a copy of the American edition of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* from which this essay quotes, and made the following remarks:

> One difficulty[. T]he human eye finds it difficult to focus on two different planes simultaneously – and see the quite different but related patterns in both. Like staring at those trick pictures of random-seeming coloured jigsaw-style patterns that suddenly – sometimes only after a very long time – reveal a distinct detailed familiar object in the foreground, against a distinct detailed landscape in the background. Once you've seen the separate planes, it's difficult not to see them for a while. But then the single dimension jumble comes back, and you have to stare again. If that's so difficult, how is anybody going to see what I'm talking about – which is very similar, physically.[33]

[32] Unpublished letter to me (20 August 1998): © The Estate of Ted Hughes, with permission from Carol Hughes.
[33] Unpublished letter to me (20 August 1998): © The Estate of Ted Hughes, with permission from Carol Hughes.

A few weeks later, on 6 October 1998, he used the same image to reach out, movingly, to his academic nemesis – John Carey:

> I regret our misunderstandings. Something keeps prompting me to tell you so.
>
> Do you know this visual riddle – where you have to divine the other distinctly different image hidden within and behind the surface image – three dimensional and just as real. (Because it's 3 dimensional it seems more real).
>
> Do you think – asking viewers to divine this hidden image is a good metaphor for what I was asking readers to do in my Shakespeare book (and in my Coleridge Essay)? (*LTH* 733)

And then, on 10 October, Hughes wrote to Keith Sagar: 'I'm sending you a visual riddle' – of the same kind, of course – and again, as a metaphor of the intellectual leap he's looking for in his readers (*PC* 284). In these late comments, Hughes returns not to his poetry, but to 'the difficulty of acquiring the double vision, then holding onto it', upon which (as he saw it) the success of his criticism depended (*LTH* 733). To Sagar, he wrote that he would like '2 years to rewrite the Shakespeare simply & more briefly' (*PC* 285).

Defending the priorities of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in the reworked Introduction of the American edition, Hughes made clear the multi-planar nature of his reading: he did not deny 'any part of Shakespeare', but only wished to 'open up the crypts and catacombs that have been – in our cultural enthusiasm for the upper architectural marvels of the realistic Shakespeare – somewhat ignored and neglected'.[34] For those who could not entertain his approach, 'in imagination, playfully – then my book must remain closed'.[35] In the 'magic eye' metaphor he described to me, to Carey and to Sagar, Hughes found an image for the Empsonian plurality and polysemy of his own practice, in which more than one truth may be read in the very same language, without collapsing into mere relativism. In this respect, Hughes's criticism operates in ways akin to poetry – as an act of imaginative inducement: what Coleridge described, in an 1808 lecture on Shakespeare, as 'the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others'.[36] Hughes the critic and Hughes the poet are at work at one and the same time.

When they refused to 'play', imaginatively, on the terms Hughes proposed, Carey and Griffiths seemed to him to prove correct his own diagnosis of the truncated psychological condition of contemporary England. What Hughes tended to interpret as a psychic schism between poetry and prose criticism, however, is more accurately regarded as a controversy that runs through criticism itself. In the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, for example, Bloom turns his wit on the 'current School of Resentment', which for him comprised 'Neo-Marxists, New Feminists, New Historicists, French-influenced theorists' and other acolytes of that 'cultural materialism' for whom

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[34] *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 39.

[35] Ibid., p. 38.

[36] S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. R.A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), vol. I p. 81.

'state power is everything and individual subjectivity is nothing'.[37] The methods, no less than the inferences of criticism, are constantly in contention – and Hughes might have more consciously and deliberately accepted his place as a critic within that ongoing contest of ideas and values, without telling himself that something so fundamental, in practice, to his cultural endeavours was antithetical to his life as a poet. As (at times) Hughes recognised, and – below the noise of battle – as his letters show, prose criticism *per se* need not be the enemy.

It is the condition of human culture to be permanently contested. That said, contentiousness need not equate to outright hostility; as Leavis once disarmingly observed: 'Collaboration may take the form of disagreement, and one is grateful to the critic whom one has found worth disagreeing with'.[38] An essay such as this, with its revisionary intent, is of course a constituent of an ongoing controversy. The revisionary reading of Hughes that I am pursuing is also intended to reconcile, however, by opposing the view – bound up in Hughes's militant sense of identity – that poetry and criticism are necessarily at odds. The irony here, I have argued, is that Hughes's own prose criticism transcends that very dichotomy, and on the contrary testifies to the impulse it shares with his poetry.

In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde proposes that criticism is itself creative: '...there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms'.[39] Wilde's claim on behalf of the 'critical faculty' – itself founded on the idea that the 'artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always'[40] – deserves pause. It identifies the 'critical' with the 'inventive', i.e. the creative. To remix William Carlos Williams's famous line, 'no ideas but in things': the ideas and the things of the human habitat involve each other. It is another irony of literary history that the rallying cry of Williams's 'thing'-based poetics is very clearly *critical* in nature. Williams's famous red wheelbarrow, on which 'so much depends',[41] itself depends upon the intellectual and imaginative activity in which poetry and criticism are coeval. Poetry is powered by critical ideas: critical ideas are powered by poetry.

Despite the burnt fox, Hughes lived his own version of this continuum. His letters disclose the moment in 1956 that he felt he had discovered his 'secret': 'I only write poems when I am busy writing prose at the same time' (*LTH* 34).[42] He may have had prose fiction rather than critical prose in mind here, but in a much later record – a journal note written just after the publication of *Birthday Letters* in January 1998 – Hughes makes a striking observation upon his entire career as a writer. He accuses himself of 'simply

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[37] *Anxiety of Influence*, xv, xvii.
[38] F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. v.
[39] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (1969; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 357.
[40] Ibid., p. 406.
[41] William Carlos Williams, 'The Red Wheelbarrow', in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I: 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), p. 224.
[42] See also Corcoran, 'Hughes as prose writer', pp. 125-6.

not exploring deeply and tenaciously enough, not writing voluminously and experimentally enough, in the forbidden field. Ironic that I have done this only with the Shakespeare book and the Coleridge essay'.[43] The 'forbidden field' was that of his own inner life, as he now conceived it – not just concerning his relationship to Sylvia Plath, though that of course was inseparable from it, but of the elusive entirety of intuition and experience that impelled him to utterance. The irony that (in his view) he had realised something so fundamental to his poetic vision in works of prose criticism was not lost on him. Writing to Seamus Heaney earlier in the month, on New Year's Day, he 'wondered if that Shakes tome wasn't the poem I should have written – decoded, hugely deflected and dumped on shoulders that could carry it' (*LTH* 704).

From his teen years under the tutelage of John Fisher, who gave him Graves's *White Goddess* as a gift on going to Cambridge, Hughes's poetic impulse was blended with his reception of poetic, intellectual and spiritual tradition.[44] Being a poet *now* involved a reading of tradition: the creative and the critical acting in concert. Like Coleridge, Eliot, Graves and Yeats (among many others), Hughes's practice extends the cultural agency of the poet beyond the making of poems, and the expanded sphere of that activity is essentially 'critical': that of judgement, evaluation, and *reading*, in the fullest sense of the word. Eliot related the role of criticism to 'the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people':[45] in other words, the time when nothing in poetry (nor perhaps much else) can be taken for granted, on the basis of common assumptions, and its substance emerges as a matter of contention. Criticism, in this sense, is a condition of social plurality. If special claims are made for the poet and the poet's role, they are made as part of a social dialogue that links past, present, and future.

The symbiosis of Hughes's poetic calling and his critical engagement with the cultural inheritance says much about the kind of poet he is. While Hughes was always wary of the 'jagged crackle of intellectual interference' getting between the poet and the making of a poem (*LTH* 730), he is not, in practice, an anti-intellectual poet. While he may have laid claim to 'a different kind of scholarship', it was 'scholarship' nonetheless (*LTH* 609). Coleridge identified 'Energy, depth, and activity of Thought' as one of the 'characteristics of original poetic genius', going as far to say that 'No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language'.[46] Coleridge's contention here has never quite caught on – despite (or because of) the force and subtlety he invested in developing this principle, which was fundamental to his poetics. While not everyone will follow Coleridge to the heart of that labyrinth, however, Ben Jonson makes a related point when he writes that 'a good

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[43] British Library Add. MS 88918/1, as quoted in Bate, *Ted Hughes*, 505.
[44] See Bate, *Ted Hughes*, 65.
[45] T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 22.
[46] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819*, I 68; and S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II 19, 25-6.

poet's made, as well as born': the making of a good poet is bound up with the poet's *learning*, and the nature of that learning. In the 1820s – by which time (in popular misconception) he is supposed to have abandoned his poetic calling – Coleridge became engrossed with that 'most pregnant and sublime Mythos and Philosopheme', the myth of Prometheus, which he projected as a work of poetry 'in which the Thinker and the Man of Learning appears as the Base of the Poet'.[47] Late Hughes wondered if his critical prose on Shakespeare was somehow the great poem he should have written, and late Coleridge projected the poem on Prometheus onto his son Hartley (who never pursued it): like *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, however, Coleridge's work 'On the Prometheus of Aeschylus' was a consummate flowering of his poetics and metaphysics, and a vision of their fusion.[48] Hughes, haunted by the now outdated notion that Coleridge's powers had been diverted from his poetic calling by (broadly speaking) his critical concerns,[49] missed the chance to construct an alternative view – more apt, in fact, to his own practice – in which the poet and the critic combine in shared endeavour.

'Eng. Lit.' now operates in a context quite different from the academy Hughes damned in the 1990s. The rise of creative writing within universities presents, at least, an opportunity to break down false barriers between the creative and the critical in intellectual and artistic life. Practice-led research – or artistic research, as it is commonly called on the continent of Europe – is now an established and growing field, pursuing fresh ways of understanding and articulating the continuum between scholarly and artistic practice, reasoning and imagining, and the methodological pluralism with regard to learning that this implies. We are still in the early days of these developments, but – in the terms of my argument here – the notion of a mutually exclusive relationship between poetry and criticism is increasingly recognised as an obstacle to both.

An alternative to the false schism (and of course, a contention in its own right) would be to propose that both the creative and the critical are founded on the impulse of *zetesis*: curiosity, questioning, seeking – the desire to know and to realise, especially as they fuse in the desire to *make*. The perpetual origination and motion of *zetesis-poiesis-gnosis* comprise the productive continuum I have in mind. Poetry, criticism and the learning they mutually imply involve 'the welling up of unknown life into consciousness' that D.H. Lawrence identified as authentic 'Thought'.

Here as elsewhere, Hughes's own meditations resonate with Lawrence's. Taking up Keats's famous distinction between the 'poet' who 'pours out a balm on the world' and the 'dreamer' who 'vexes it', Hughes articulated his own view that whereas the writings of the 'dreamer' are composed of 'the symptoms of the malady – the symptoms, that is, as distinct from the healing response', while those of the 'poet' enact a 'healing energy', as if produced, 'in a natural and spontaneous way, by the psychological

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[47] S.T. Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), vol. V pp. 142, 143.
[48] See Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, pp. 3, 81-2, 91-2, 159, 198, 202, 229n, 231n.
[49] See 'Contexts' (*WP* 1-2) for an early instance of this.

component of the auto-immune system' (*WP* 249). For Hughes, it was not the 'materials' of poetry that mattered, but its 'source in the biological core of an individual', that is the source of that healing energy – whose works 'make us feel as if we were being healed', and which we seek out 'like the sick animal searching out the specific healing herb'. The materials of poetry 'can be anything at all that the healing energy feels like using', he goes on to say in his essay on Keats, but

> if those materials are not selected by the healing energy itself, if they are selected instead by the cerebrations of ego, or by any impulse from any other corner of us, then the proper power and beauty of the 'healing' substance will be that far vitiated. (*WP* 250)

Hughes makes no mention of prose criticism here, but it's fair to infer that Hughes's angst over the form derives from a suspicion that criticism did not flow from this healing energy. My point has been to suggest that on the contrary – depending on the direction and the substance of its learning – it can. In this respect, Hughes's use of Keats's distinction may be useful in discriminating not just between differing qualities in poetry, but between competing forms of criticism.

Ted Hughes contended, both as a poet and a critic, that the life of the mythopoeic imagination is fundamental not just to the history of our species, but to the possibility of wisdom. His works are proof against his own sense of conflict between poetry and criticism. My aim has been to show that poetry, criticism, and the learning they embody can share a common source, impulse and agency – and combine in the task of invoking new orders of insight, sensitivity and intelligence.

Contributors

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